



Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) for raising hogs. Owned by Flaherty Family Farms LLC west side of Section 27, Roosevelt Township, northeast of Pocahontas on Highway N57. 2013.

IT IS WHAT IT IS: A MANTRA

Issues in Modern Agriculture

On Saturday afternoon, November 11, 2017, after the memorial service and luncheon for Velma Howard at the Shared Ministry church in Rolfe, I hurried to the house that I had arranged to stay at for the weekend and changed clothes. I then headed to the land northeast of town in Des Moines Township that I have given to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation—60 acres outright in 2011 and 180 in a reserved life estate in 2016.

I arrived at the farm in time to videotape tenant Betsy Dahl harvesting the last rounds of our first-ever certified organic crop of soybeans. There had been neither genetically modified crops nor herbicides on that land since she started farming it in 2009. We both were proud. She took a selfie of us, beaming, and texted it to Erin, our management contact person at the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, who texted back that she was proud, too.

Betsy drove a 1988 or so vintage green John Deere combine to harvest the beans. I thought of all the times I have stood in fields watching the harvest. For instance, as a child, watching but knowing that in our family harvesting was men's work—demanding some kind of supposedly male-only skills that a woman would not have. Of course, a woman—or even I as a teenager—could drive a tractor such as our old Farmall Model M and pull a barge wagon of corn from the fields to the farmstead to unload. And Velma Howard had a key role in farm decisions, as well as driving a Farmall to haul and unload corn at the crib while Verle drove the tractor with mounted corn picker to harvest the corn. Even so, harvest has often seemed like an exclusive “male farmer club.”

I am aware that this territory—these lands and the institutions such as the churches, school, cemetery, the town, the rituals of planting and harvest, are a major part of who I am. I have been immersed in this culture, this life. There is no way I can cut myself off from it. And yet, I have such a disdain—partially for many things I have written about before. Partially for how this area is devolving even more than I had ever anticipated. In many ways, I would like to be able to move beyond the past—to not return to my home county because there is so little there that interests me except my land. I am a liberal, and the county is so conservative. However, the turf and culture of the area are a part of who I am that I cannot escape. The small amount of joy that continues to exist in going there is in experiences such as briefly connecting with Kenny Bennett at the visitation for Joe Reigelsberger, having longer conversations with Monsignor Mike Sernett and Paul Harrold, and watching Betsy harvest our first organic crop on that special day.

I felt such a wholesome sense of well-being as I stood in the field that afternoon, watching Betsy harvest. I also found myself asking just what it was that I was searching for as I stood there for minutes on end in the cool air as she drove the combine to the far end of the field and back. Definitely, I was aware of the difference of watching a woman in the farmer role—a woman there because of decisions I had made. Yet, I still pondered what it was that mesmerized me. Was I looking for something from my childhood? Perhaps my grandfather coming over the slope in the land with his team of horses or my father in his combine? Or something greater? Perhaps the spirit of Mother Earth? A connection to the universe? A connection with the numinous? I recall when I first went to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and the speaker talked about how all of creation, including human beings, are made of the dust of the falling stars. I am aware also of how my yoga classes end with the teacher and students, bowing to the ground, acknowledging our divinity and connection to all creation.

After many decades of my wanting my land farmed more sustainably, but feeling like I was not walking the talk, accomplishing this goal of having a certified organic crop was a major milestone. And yet, ironically and disturbingly, it was the same day that I had learned that Dicamba, a new combination of older herbicides that most farmers had discontinued using, had been applied to at least one field in the neighborhood where I had grown up.

On the ride to and from the cemetery for Velma's graveside rites, Paul Harrold and I got to talking about Dicamba. The new mix has been marketed for use with newly developed GMO (genetically modified organisms) beans designed to be resistant to the herbicide. The EPA has approved Dicamba, but many people are skeptical about its safety. Already earlier in the week, I had talked on the phone with Denny Flaherty, asking if he knew of any area farmers using Dicamba. Denny did not think any farmers were yet using it, but on this weekend, I would learn from Paul that it had been used.

Paul said that during the past spring, two weeks after an operator had applied Dicamba to a rented field across the road from his land, the chemical volatilized and drifted with the wind across the road into one of his fields, damaging an area of his beans. Paul said the farmer was aware of and concerned about the damage to the beans, and called Paul, asking him to keep track of the damage. Actually, Paul did not think the damage to be that extensive. I also learned that it was most likely inevitable that Dicamba had either been used or soon would be used by the operators who grow seed beans for Pioneer Hybrid International Seed on the land surrounding the farmstead where I grew up and that my older sister Clara now owns.

Such a contrast within a family. Although I am fearful and resentful of conventional agriculture with its dependence on chemicals and other high cost corporate inputs and still have something like 60 percent of my land in those practices, I am putting an increasing number of my acres into conservation programs and organic practices. Meanwhile, all my siblings continue with their same tenants and the march of conventional agriculture.

There are often times when I need to challenge my attitudes, gross generalizations, and the ease with which I can vilify other people or practices. How often have I overtly or covertly judged other people such as the farmers who farm huge numbers of acres with the latest in agricultural technology as promoted by corporations? How often do I truly appreciate the humanity of those people whose values are different from mine? I think of all the years that I drove up and down the road I grew up on to observe, photograph, videotape, visit with people, interview some of them, and record my thoughts. I recently listened to some of my audio micro-cassette journals from the 1990s when I drove along my road and heard the many times that I talked about new corn emerging in the spring, the weather, ponds of water in the fields in wet years, or about the harvest. I experienced only the surface of the culture in that rural neighborhood. I was critical of much of what was happening in agriculture and had catty thoughts about some of the people, especially the large-scale farming operators, especially the more aggressive ones who would bid us the cash rent rate, taking rental ground from other farmers who could not pay as much.

However, I realized while listening to the cassettes that I did not know much about who some of the people really were. What was it like for them to get up each morning during the past 30 years, decide what clothes to wear, have breakfast, see the children (if they had children) off to school, worry about sickness in the family, work through issues with their spouses (if they had spouses), decide what equipment, seed, fertilizer or herbicide to use, where to get financing, how to pay back the loans or pay the bills, figure out whom they could trust to talk to about their inner thoughts, figure out what faith community could meet their needs, how to deal with long hours to plant or harvest a crop even during challenging weather conditions, and how to support aging parents? How do they feel about farmers being the scapegoat for nitrates in the Des Moines drinking water, the dead zone at the lower end of the Mississippi,

and other problems created by big ag? How do they feel about being a cog, even if they were big-time farmers, in the system?

Fortunately, Denny and Jeff DeWall, who farm my Roosevelt township land with conventional practices, do so much less aggressively than some of the other farmers in the area and will not use Dicamba. They did not need me to tell them it was a bad idea. Denny even said that years ago they had used Banville, a precursor to Dicamba and had decided it was not a good chemical to use.

The problem that both Paul and Denny see, and that is consistent with articles I have read via the Practical Farmers of Iowa listserv, is that, in the future, even farmers who do not believe in using the herbicide will feel forced to plant the Dicamba-resistant seed. Their reasoning is that the newly genetically engineered soybean plants will dominate the landscape and that other farmers will believe they have to pay the high prices for the GMO seed simply as a precaution against damage due to the potential drifting of Dicamba, which is applied to the GMO plants.

I still feel the conundrum of love-hate for much of my past and present rural heritage, but the edges have softened over the decades. And yet, there are major issues that broil my spirit in addition to the ubiquitous use of GMO seed and toxic herbicides on the crop fields.

My father seemed brilliant and technologically advanced when he created an 8-row corn planter from a pair of 4-row planters in the early 1950s. Now most farmers in the area, according to Denny, have 16-row planters, with some farmers using 24-row planters. He added that some of the “aggressive, big outfits” that come into the area to operate land use 36-row planters.

Today, there is the prevalent use of semi-tractors and trailers that has evolved in the last decade to haul grain from the field back to grain bins at a farm, the elevators in nearby towns, or more distant markets. Denny says it is easier to hire a retired farmer or other person from town with a commercial driver’s license to drive a semi than to get someone to drive a tractor to pull grain wagons. He also talks about efficiency—that a farmer can load 1,000 bushels of grain in a semi-trailer, and it can travel at 55 miles per hour, getting to town and back to the farm faster than a tractor pulling a wagon could travel. He said it is a far cry from the past—a



The VeraSun ethanol production plant between Fort Dodge and Manson on Highway 7 is now the Valero Fort Dodge Ethanol Plant. 2011.

person seldom sees the co-op loading a train with grain, but instead the co-op uses semi-tractors and trailers to haul corn to ethanol plants and beans to processing plants. Also, the local cooperative and other buyers will send semis to pick up grain at farms. Oh, so much different from the days when I drove a Model M Farmall tractor, pulling a wooden barge wagon to haul grain from the field to the farm. Barge wagons were ubiquitous in agriculture then but now have mostly disappeared.

Another change that I have seen is the prevalence of large stacks of bales of corn stover, some as big as old brick high school buildings. Denny says the bales are sold to the ethanol production plants in Emmetsberg, Albert City, and Fort Dodge. However, he adds that those facilities are not operating at full force. Nor does he know how they can make money, especially when the price for gasoline, which uses ethanol, is under three dollars.



Bales of corn stover on land owned by Douglas and Joy Cornwell Palmer and farmed by Mick Reigelsberger in section 14 Roosevelt Township just west of the farm where Helen grew up. 2015.

Farmers harvest the corn stalks into bales of stover rather than leave the plant residue on the ground. They sell the bales to ethanol and biofuel processing plants. Advocates say these plants are great for the state, but many people feel they are bad for the state. The fuels they produce are not truly renewable and are dependent on government subsidies. The plants use substantial amounts of water in a way that could potentially deplete aquifers that Iowans depend on for domestic water use. Also, using the corn stalks for fuel means there is hardly any ground cover in crop fields during winter months.

I asked Denny about the use of drones. He said that although he has not seen much use of them in the area, he is aware that some farmers use drone technology to scout what kind of drought or flooding has happened in their fields or where there might be weed pressure or damage from insects. Other new developments include GPS-driven tractors and combines with sensors and computer programs that record yield data for specific areas of the field and map the fields to determine how much and where to apply fertilizer.

There is a seven to one ratio of hog population to human population. In 2015, Iowa had over 22 million hogs to just over three million people. The second-leading pork-producing state, North Carolina, had only nine million hogs that year. Most of Iowa's hogs are housed in confinement buildings with odors that make areas of the state nearly uninhabitable for human beings.

The keynote speaker at the 2016 Practical Farmers of Iowa Annual Conference was John Kempf, an Amish farmer from Ohio and founder of Advancing Eco-Agriculture (AEA). Much of what he said was too technical and scientific for me to fully comprehend, but the gist of his message sank in for me and impressed many of the people who heard him and were eager to learn more.



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In his PowerPoint presentation, Kempf showed an image of an iron nail and listed the factors that would cause the nail to oxidize, rust, and not be useful. He used the idea of the rusted nail as an analogy for the ways in which many of the status quo, commercial inputs that farmers use, thinking they will enhance yields, actually diminish the health of soil. I wanted to make sure I was interpreting Kempf correctly and called AEA. The staff person who spoke with me said that, indeed, Kempf's message is that many agricultural inputs are killing life in the soil with the result that minerals are no longer available.

Water coming from farm wells is not safe to drink. In going through my journals, I found an entry telling about a conversation I had with Velma and Verle Howard in May 1994 about how the county health department was asking farmers to inspect the water in the wells at their farms. Verle said that although there had not been livestock on their farm for the past 15 years, there were livestock toxins in their water, making it unsafe to drink. Denny Flaherty estimates that currently probably 20 percent or less of farm families drink water from their wells due to what he calls the "enormous amount of nitrates" in the water.

A large percentage of the waterways in Iowa are toxic. The contamination is partially a result of the way farmers fertilize their fields and how the millions of the hogs in the state are raised. In March 2015, the board of trustees of the Des Moines Water Works sued three counties near Pocahontas County for the way the counties allow farmers to let nitrates enter the waterways and end up in Des Moines where Water Works pays millions of dollars to remove the nitrates. In March 2017, a federal judge dismissed the case.

Concern is growing about how the lack of ground cover on farm fields during the fallow months exacerbates climate change. Conversely, climate change creates volatile swings in weather with events such as droughts and floods even in one season, making farming more unpredictable and challenging than ever. There are, to be sure, many other ways in which climate change has already affected agriculture, and it appears inevitable that future challenges will be more varied and alarming than scientists, farmers, and common folk can currently imagine.

Retired Iowa State University extension agriculture specialist, Don Hofstrand, reported in a July 2018 newsletter article that "future five-day heat waves in the Midwest are projected to be 13 degrees higher than present by mid-century." Also, the 2018 Fourth National Climate Assessment mandated by Congress with its Global Change Research Act of 1990 predicts that there will likely be a 25% drop in Iowa corn yields by the middle of the century as a result of climate change.

On July 19, 2019, the Iowa Public Television program *Iowa Press* focused on climate change and its relationship to agriculture in Iowa. Gene Takle, Professor Emeritus of Climatology affiliated with the Department of Agronomy at Iowa State University, and David Courard-Hauri, Professor and Director of the Environmental Science and Policy Program at Drake University, were the featured guests.

Takle said, “The rise in rainfall, particularly April, May, June, has been probably the most notable change in climate that is affecting Iowa right now. It has delayed the planting substantially this year and so then the crop is behind and it’s not going to be able to complete the pollination and grain-filling periods that are necessary before harvest.”

Host David Yepsen asked Takle about his thoughts on the Green New Deal. Takle replied that farmers could play an important role by “storing more carbon in our Iowa soils. By our tillage processes we have removed about half of the carbon from our Iowa soils over the last 100 years.”

My understanding of this issue is that because of the heavy spring rains and short window of time for farmers to plant their crops, perhaps with only two days of optimal weather, many believe they need to buy larger equipment and utilize the latest in seed, chemicals, herbicides, and other products that industrial agriculture has to offer. History shows, however, that aggressive, industrialized agriculture has been a culprit in depleting the carbon content in our soils. It would seem wiser to explore other models of agriculture—perhaps organic that leaves more organic matter in the ground—but for sure, adaptations of the regenerative agriculture practices that North Dakota farmer Gabe Brown practices and presents in his 2018 book, *Dirt to Soil: One Family’s Journey into Regenerative Agriculture*. David Montgomery, a University of Washington geologist, also presents promising alternative practices in his 2017 book, *Growing a Revolution: Bringing Our Soil Back to Health*.

When asked about long-term climate perspectives for Iowa, Takle said the excessive rains of recent years have also generated increased moisture levels in the air that, fortunately, so far have suppressed the intensity of summer heat in the state. He cautioned, however, “But as we move toward the middle of the current century we’re going to see a substantial rise in heat. The Midwest has been projected to be more, have higher changes in extreme temperatures than any other region of the country. So we’re not looking forward to that but this is the time to plan, to, as you say, maybe examine our crops. If corn isn’t going to pollinate under these kind of conditions, then we need to be thinking about different ways or looking at planting schedules differently or different hybrids so you can spread out that pollination period.”

Katarina Sostaric, a reporter for Iowa Public Radio, asked what individuals could be doing to counter climate change. Courard-Hauri replied, “We get that question a lot and I always wrestle with how to answer because I think the best answer is one can get involved in making political change. You can have a lot more of an effect finding ways to get society to move away from fossil fuels than you can changing your vehicle or those kind of things. So I worry a little bit when we personalize it and everybody tries to figure out what is the thing that they can do. That said, obviously there are a lot of, there’s a lot of work suggesting what are some effective things you can do.”

Yepsen asked Takle about cattle and the methane they produce in Iowa. Takle confirmed, “It is a big problem.” When asked what could be done about it, he responded, “Well, the dairy industry has actually taken a lead in this and there are a lot of methane digesters now that have been set up around large dairy operations where they capture the methane and use it to repower the farm or to power the farm with renewable energy.”

This year, 2019, Iowa is again an early state in vetting presidential candidates as it prepares for its 2020 caucus meetings. An example of how agriculture and climate change have been elevated in the national campaign discourse is found in a YouTube video dated August 8,

2019. In it, candidate Elizabeth Warren and long-time Practical Farmer of Iowa member Ron Rosmann are standing in a large pasture that includes eight grazing paddocks for cattle at the Rosmann Family Farms near Harlan, Iowa. They are talking about the issue of cattle-generated methane in relation to climate change, especially in light of the Green New Deal, legislation introduced by progressive Democrats in Congress earlier in the year.¹

Rosmann refers to the serious problems of large-scale cattle production and claims, “Ruminants are not designed to eat corn. But yet, I wouldn’t say we should get rid of them. You know, the Green New Deal says we need to get rid of cows. I don’t agree with that because well-managed grassland where you rotationally graze with all these paddocks ... you are actually going to use more CO₂ and sequester more carbon because of the regrowth all the time, and yet, that’s a permanent pasture. So anyway, my point is we have become so ignorant of the basic principles of biology in food production that we have answered them all through technology instead of letting Mother Earth and having respect [for her]”



Ron Rosmann at Practical Farmers of Iowa field day. Circa 1999.

Ron graduated from Iowa State University in 1973 and returned to farm with his parents near Harlan. His wife, Maria Vakulskas Rosmann, is a Sioux City native and graduate of Creighton University where she was editor of the school’s news bureau prior to their marriage. I first met Ron when I was on a photo assignment at a PFI field day the Rosmann family hosted in about 1997. In 2010, Ron and Maria received PFI’s annual Sustainable Agriculture Achievement Award.

Ron, Maria, and their sons David and Daniel along with Daniel’s wife, Ellen Walsh-Rosmann, farm 700 acres organically and conduct on-farm research analogous to the kind of creative exploring Gabe Brown and David Montgomery have done. In addition, the Rosmann family owns both an on-farm store, Farm Sweet Farm, and in-town restaurant, Milk and Honey, featuring locally-grown produce. Ron and Maria have also lobbied at the Iowa legislature and nation’s capital. And now in August 2019, there was Ron in his pasture, patiently teaching and having a mature, civil conversation with a candidate who has the potential to be the next president of the United States.

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFSuI7rFCFE>



The Ron and Maria Rosmann family are dedicated Practical Farmers of Iowa members and the epitome of leaders in sustainable agriculture. Their farm and local food operations are near Harlan, Iowa. Top row, from left to right: Daniel Rosmann, Geneva Rosmann, Mark Rosmann, Maggie Rosmann and David Rosmann. Bottom row, from left to right: Ellen Walsh-Rosmann, Ron Rosmann, Xavier Rosmann, Maria Vakulskas Rosmann and Becky Tompkins-Rosmann (holding newborn Ellie Rosmann). 2018. *Photo courtesy of Deb Hastert Photography.*

PFI's mission is that of "Equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities," and as an organization, it does not engage in politics. Yet some of its members are model citizens doing ground-breaking work and effectively engaging in politics. I am grateful to Ron and Maria, their family, and other PFI members for their farming practices, research, and willingness to share their knowledge with peers, newcomers to sustainable agriculture, and political leaders who are in a position to shape policy.

The USDA estimated in November 2015 that the net farm income for that year was down 39 percent from the previous year. Rental rates and land values were also down significantly. It seems clear that paying more money for agricultural inputs, having access to advanced technologies, and harvesting high yields do not ensure that farming will be profitable for farmers and landowners. The system may be profitable, though, for the corporations that produce agricultural inputs and corporations that can buy corn and beans cheaply, convert them to (often unhealthy) food or other products, and sell their products for a huge profit.

Many Iowans were upset when a Texas oil company was allowed to build the underground Bakken pipeline in 2016 and 2017, even after much protest by environmental and farm activists. The 1,172-mile-long pipe, 30 inches in diameter, begins in northwest North Dakota, goes from northwest to southeast Iowa, and hooks up with a pipeline in Illinois that takes oil to a Texas refinery. None of the oil is intended for domestic use in the Midwest. The line cuts through land, including prime farmland, has a construction right-of-way of 150 feet, is at least 48 inches underground and is intended to transport 570,000 barrels per day. The crude oil that the pipeline carries is the result of fracking in western North Dakota. Due to the way the glaciers were formed there, the chemical composition of the oil makes it more volatile than oil extracted and produced by other means. In several cases, the company gained access to privately-owned property through the use of eminent domain; however, the pipeline provides little direct benefit to Iowa, except that it created jobs for members of labor unions. Neither Iowa's governor, the Department

of Natural Resources, nor the Iowa Utilities Board did anything to stop the construction, even after extensive hearings with plenty of people speaking in opposition to the pipeline.

Retired ISU journalism professor Dick Haws wrote a December 3, 2015, opinion piece in the *Ames Tribune* stating that there should be a pot of gold in the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. The fund had been created by a constitutional amendment in 2010 with 63 percent of Iowa voters voting in its favor. The fate of the fund has not been good. Instead of being a pot of gold, Haws claims it has a zero balance and blames both the legislature and governor for its lack of results.

In 2019, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, as the main force, but with peripheral support from the Iowa Cattlemen's Association, pushed a multi-faceted bill in the legislature to seriously cramp the work of non-profits, with the greatest impact on the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. INHF is a non-partisan organization that was founded in 1979 in response to the leadership of the late Republican Governor Robert Ray. In its 40 years, INHF has been a highly regarded steward of land in a state where less than three percent of land is owned publicly for recreation and conservation. Iowa is one of the worst states in the nation in regard to this statistic, ranking above only Kansas and Rhode Island.

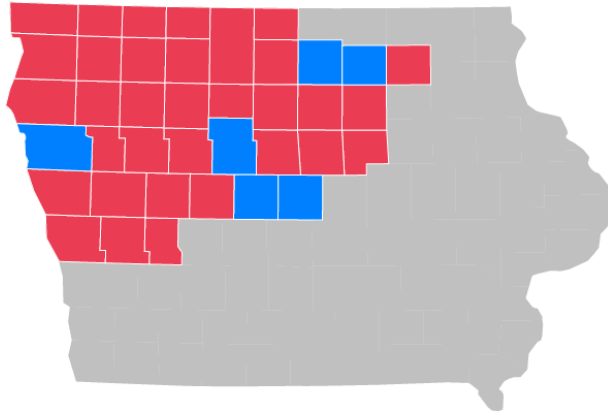
One item in the bill would have ended tax credits for those people who donate land to the Foundation, similar to my gift of 60 acres to the organization in 2011. Another item would have prevented non-profit groups such as INHF from obtaining federal funds in the form of low interest loans administered by the State Revolving Loan Fund for projects that have a direct impact on water quality. As a private organization, INHF has been able to risk investing in parcels along rivers and on hillsides in a timelier fashion than the bureaucracy of, for instance, a county conservation board for such projects. INHF has also been able to apply for loans through the revolving fund to hold the parcels until a city or county is in a position to buy the land. In the end, the INHF's use of federal dollars benefits the public.

The good news is that the tax credit survived. The bad news is that the INHF and groups such as The Nature Conservancy and Pheasants Forever can no longer apply for the loans. One has to wonder if the Iowa Farm Bureau wants Iowa to be nothing but parcels of border-to-border farmland. The IFB representatives at the legislature claimed their organization wanted to protect the land to make it available to young farmers; however, it seems to me that there are better ways to ensure farmers have access to land.

Iowa's Conservative Ideological Icon in Congress

Many of my friends and I are upset that our U.S. Congressional district representative is a man who is a major embarrassment in the eyes of liberals, even on the national scene, for his bigoted rhetoric. Representative King does not think he is a bad guy. He doesn't recognize that his rhetoric about immigrants is crude, that white supremacy lacks virtue, or that there is value in diversity. In fact, he has been quoted in recent months as asking what is so wrong with the white nationalist teachings that he learned as a student. I am not sure what is worse—his style of conservatism or the fact that he does not know why it is unacceptable to so many people.

He has either gotten so bad or his own party has finally woken up. Governor Kim Reynolds, who ascended from being Lieutenant Governor to full-fledged Governor when her predecessor, Terry Branstad, became U.S. ambassador to China in May 2017, had King as chairperson of her first gubernatorial campaign. King, who first went to Congress in 2003, was easily reelected on November 6, 2018. However, by the next Tuesday, House Republican leaders had stripped him of his committee assignments, and Reynolds had lost her patience



Steve King, born in 1949, was a northwest Iowa business person and Republican state senator when first elected to Congress in 2002. He won 62 percent of the vote and all but one county in the state's 5th District. King continued to dominate the district and the one it morphed into for the 2012 election after Iowa lost a seat in Congress. The new 4th District included some historically liberal counties, but from 2012 through 2016, King continued to win with 53, 62, and 61 percent of the vote. His closest contest was in 2018 when he defeated the Democratic nominee, J.D. Scholten, a paralegal and former professional baseball player born in 1980. King received 50.4 percent of the vote to Scholten's 47 percent and lost in six counties. The two are again running for Congress in 2020. The map shows King's counties in red and Scholten's in blue. *Illustration created by Harrison W. Inefuku.*

with King. A *Des Moines Register* article quoted her as saying, "I think that Steve King needs to make a decision if he wants to represent the people and the values of the 4th District or do something else, and I think he needs to take a look at that."

Not many years ago, Iowa had five congressional districts, and Steve King represented the 4th District that served Pocahontas County, where I was raised and now own land. Then with the state's declining population, Iowa lost a district. Now both Story County (including Ames, where I live) and Pocahontas County are together in District 4.

It's been said by political analysts that King is so perfectly matched to the conservatism of the district and its huge percentage of conservative Christians, especially in the northwest Iowa counties, that he could serve in Congress as long as he wanted. In Pocahontas County in the 2018 election, King got 59 percent of the vote, and a young Democrat new to politics, J.D. Scholten, got 40 percent. In Story County, the numbers were reversed. Scholton got 65 percent to King's 32 percent.

During the 2016 congressional election cycle, I noticed, as I often have, that an evangelical farmer in my home county had a Steve King sign posted near his home. I got up what gumption and good intentions I could muster to ask the simple question of what my friend saw in Representative King, considering some of King's coarse language and rigid views. My friend replied that King was a friend of a friend of his and that King was a "true conservative." I did not have the wherewithal to carry the conversation further. Had I been more adept at dealing with difficult topics, I would have said, "Tell me more. For instance, how do you define a real conservative?" If I had voiced my thoughts, I would have said something to the effect that compassion, especially toward strangers and the downtrodden, is a key component of Christian teachings. I would have added that Jesus was raised at the intersection of many cultures and was a multi-culturalist and that Jesus was not Caucasian. I would also have said to my farmer friend that I knew him to be a compassionate Christian person and that it seemed incongruent that he would support King either by posting a sign or voting for him.

After the Republican party stripped him of his committee assignments, King held town hall meetings around the state. The first was in Primghar in far northwest Iowa. A *Des Moines Register* article report and video clip showed how King's followers at the rally still held him in high regard. One woman, Pamela Harmon, who was a retired nurse and resident of the district,

said, “As I came up today, I thought it must be difficult to come with the difficulties you’ve been through, to come back and face your constituency. And I was wrong. You’re proud and talented and we’re proud of you, and thanks for coming to see us.” Then the crowd applauded. In February, without apology, he announced he will run for Congress again in 2020.

I am learning to use a phrase that one of my tenants, Denny Flaherty from rural Palmer, often uses. Now 65 and transitioning into retirement, he has farmed for me for at least 25 years since he teamed up with Don and Jeff DeWall. Don died in 2002 when he went to Omaha for a heart operation, but Denny and Jeff continue to farm together. Denny is wise, fun, pragmatic, and able to fathom some of my esoteric thoughts, critiques, and questions about what is happening in agriculture. He has seen a lot come and go in the countryside, including his years of small-scale diversified farming, shearing sheep, and recovering from the 1980s Farm Crisis that found many farmers committing suicide and farm families having to move off the land.

The crisis hit Denny’s family hard, but he persevered and paid back the money that he had borrowed. He often says about a troublesome situation, “It is what it is.” I am never going to be able to change the culture of this state—not the congressional district nor my home county, which seems about as conservative as any. As a mantra, I need to chant, “It is what it is.” Thanks, Denny, for all the many long conversations we have had, negotiating rental rates and talking about the latest scoop on what is happening in the Rolfe area.

Toward a More Fluid and Compassionate Understanding of Heritage

I feel remiss for the times I have used the terms “tradition” and “heritage” in glib ways, as though life in the Midwest began in the 1880s when my farming ancestors moved to Wisconsin then Iowa. I am also concerned about how members of my family, people in general, the media, Steve King, and other persons of influence make great and distorted statements about tradition and heritage. Just what does Steve King mean when he insists that Western civilization is superior to other cultures? Just what do commonly used phrases such as “family values,” “our rural heritage,” “our great Iowa work ethic,” “Make America Great Again,” and other campaign slogans mean?

There was tension during one of the early years of the new millennium when my siblings and I emailed back and forth about plans for the Christmas dinner that would be held at my parents’ home. I had suggested that in addition to our reading the nativity story at the beginning of the meal, various family members might want to share other reading material, for instance a poem, essay, or short story, between the main course and dessert. Mother had long held to a tradition of reading the nativity story in a somberly fashion while the family sat at the kitchen table, waiting to start our Christmas morning breakfast. The ritual then shifted from breakfast to the early afternoon dinner. I anticipated that my family, which consists of many readers and librarians, would readily accept my suggestion to add interest to the mealtime conversation. However, one sister, who has an inordinate amount of influence, did not like the idea.

At my apartment in Gilbert, the night before Christmas day that year, my close friend Joy, who knew of my suggestion to add more readings to the meal, gave me a small hardback book published in the 1940s or 1950s of Christmas short stories by Iowa authors. I skimmed the book before going to bed and chose a wonderful story about going to the family homeplace farm for Christmas day. I took the book with me to my parents’ home. As the meal began, I told the others about it and how, if there was an opportunity, I would like to read the story. Then I placed the book on a side table. Later, when the main course was coming to an end, sister Clara asked if I would like to read the story. I am grateful for the opening she gave me and for the response of her husband, Hal, who told a story about Christmas from his past.

The sister, who had not liked my suggestion of reading to each other, met me in the kitchen while I was rinsing the dishes from the main course. She was angry and chided me, insisting that I should have warned people in advance that I was going to read the story so that she could have left the room. Months later in emails, it became clear that she felt reading any other story than the nativity story was a violation of family tradition and sacrilegious.

During those communications, I tried to retain my equanimity and explain something I had learned in seminary. “Tradition” is fluid and has elements of both conservation and change. For instance, many of the hymns that churchgoers consider to be “traditional” have not always been part of the Christian tradition. As an example, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” is sung to the tune of what had been a popular German beer-drinking song that originally was at a much faster tempo than what conventional organists now play the song. I am not advocating that traditions be ripped up but am concerned about a balance of the conservation and change elements for our family and society at large.

In what decade, by whose initiative, and by what rationale, for instance, did highly processed foods such as cheesy potato casserole and green bean casserole morph into our family’s definition of a traditional Christmas meal? Or when did Grandma’s mincemeat and pecan pies fade out to be replaced by pies from Bakers Square?



Nowadays, I stay in Ames for Christmas and do not remember how long ago I last joined my family for a Christmas meal. Not only is “tradition” a fluid concept, but much of how it is defined has to do with who is in control of the definition and what they perceive to be important. That is not much different for the concept of “heritage.” It seems that insisting on one definition of either “tradition” or “heritage” is not helpful; in fact, to do so can be detrimental. It’s a matter not only of exclusivity but also of distortion.

In 2018, in preparing to produce a short experimental video about “heritage,” I played with words, attempting to develop some helpful sentences about “heritage.” Here is what I wrote:

Considering that heritage is fluid and amorphous, no two individuals—not even siblings—share identical heritages.

Heritage is a matter of facts, perspectives, and interpretations that shape the lives of the living and of persons not yet born.

Heritage is the cumulative spinning of individual and collective narratives about the life journeys of our ancestors.

Although one can be nostalgic about the past, a heritage is neither intrinsically virtuous nor not virtuous.

One needs to take care not to think his or her heritage more nor less virtuous than the heritage of another tribe.

The stories of our ancestors are neither more nor less important than who we are and what we do today in our own migrations.

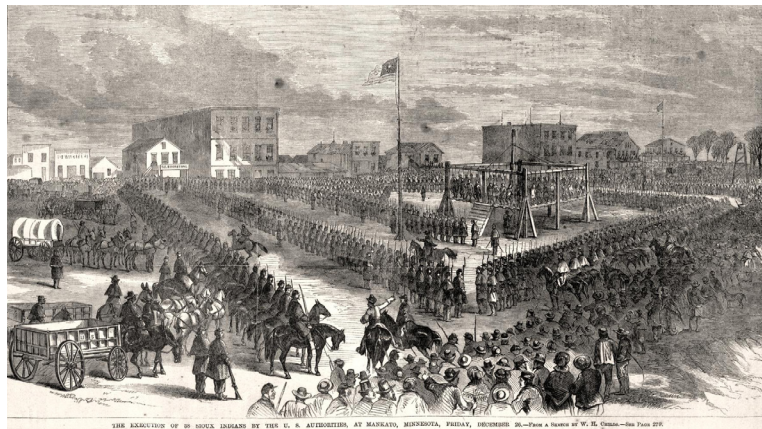
My ancestors were part of the Northern European settling and creation of the Midwestern farm culture.

I am participant or at least witness to the unsettling and destruction of that same culture.

I grieve the losses yet welcome some opportunities, even though fear can reign louder than hope.

I should remember that the people in photos of my stoic ancestors were probably not much unlike me. They were born into this world, were once children, loved and in turn loved others, experienced joy, had their foibles, faced challenges, feared what the future would bring, and yet continued on their journeys. And they were immigrants.

Early in January of this year, I listened to *This American Life*, a documentary program on National Public Radio. The episode, "Little War on the Prairie," was about an event in Mankato, Minnesota, in 1862. Mankato is only 140 miles north of Pocahontas (and its statue of Princess Pocahontas) and 100 miles north of Spirit Lake, Iowa, where other staff members and I acted out a pow wow one night during each one-week or two-week session for our campers at Camp Foster YMCA.



Public execution of 38 Dakota. Illustration by W.H. Childs, 12/26/1862.
Courtesy to Pioneer Press: Minnesota Historical Society

The program synopsis for "Little War on The Prairie" introduces producer John Biewen and says, "Nobody ever talked about the most important historical event ever to happen there: in 1862, it was the site of the largest mass execution in U.S. history. Thirty-eight Dakota Indians were hanged after a war with white settlers. John went back to Minnesota to figure out what really happened 150 years ago, and why Minnesotans didn't talk about it much after."

The mass hanging is a horrific part of Minnesota history, but so are the ways, explored in the documentary, in which the U.S. government deceived the Dakota and other Indian tribes. These kinds of policies, corruption, and other sinister acts may very well be part of what established conditions for my ancestors to settle in the Rolfe area. The final words of the hour-long program, spoken by Duke University history professor Tim Tyson, seem the most relevant as I attempt to define what the word “heritage” might or could mean:

So we invent a fake history for ourselves that doesn't deal with the complexities. And I think that, in some ways, that's what the South and the upper Midwest have in common, is that there's a delusion at work about who we were. And that's why we have a hard time about who we are. So that the kind of self-congratulatory history that passes for heritage, it keeps us from seeing ourselves and doing better.

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

Andrea Basche, a friend who earned her doctorate in sustainable agriculture at Iowa State University, sent an email in 2015 via the ISU sustainable agriculture listserv, announcing a new video that her organization, The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), had posted on YouTube. The video features former ISU professor Ricardo Salvador, director of the Union's Food and Environment Program. According to the UCS and Salvador, “An astonishing one in three kids today will develop diabetes in their lifetimes, while the country's dominant agricultural practices pollute our water and degrade our soil. These symptoms of our broken food system are largely the result of federal policies that line the pockets of agribusiness at the expense of our health, the environment, and the economy. But it's in your power to change all this.”



I knew that a search committee for a new director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture had named Salvador as its number one choice to fill the position in 2010 but that Iowa State University President Gregory Geoffrey had rejected the recommendation. I asked on the PFI listserv if anyone could explain the history of how that had happened. Gabrielle Roesch, another graduate of the sustainable agriculture program, and Betty Wells of the Leopold Center pointed me to a 2010 blog post by Brian DeVore of the Land Stewardship Project based in Minnesota:

In 1987, the Iowa Groundwater Protection Act imposed a tax on pesticides and fertilizers, providing the financial seed for the launching of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. And it was planted smack-dab in the middle of conventional ag academia: the campus of Iowa State University.

Perhaps it's a sign of how desperate the conventional ag community was after the “Farm Crisis” of the 80s that a center named after the

father of the land ethic was allowed to be located at the state's land grant university.

And this was no mere "think tank" that produces innocuous white papers in some ivory silo. The law states clearly that the mission of the Center is to "identify and reduce negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts of agricultural practices."

ISU began the search for a new Leopold Center director in 2009, and Salvador, who was then working in plant pathology at North Carolina State University, was its favorite candidate. ISU President Gregory Geoffrey did not want Salvador, who was never called to be director of the Leopold Center.

DeVore explained, "Three members of the [Leopold] advisory board wrote President Geoffrey a letter of protest, but he stuck with his choice. As *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports, the Iowa Farm Bureau had made it clear to Geoffrey that they did not want Salvador as the director of the Center. The dean of ISU's ag school, Wendy Wintersteen, also told Geoffrey that 'agriculture groups' in the state weren't pleased with Salvador's background in sustainable ag. Geoffrey told *The Chronicle [of Higher Education]* that it was important to have a Leopold Center director who could 'walk the middle ground.'"

In September 2010, I was invited to attend a luncheon that Olivia Madison, who was dean of the ISU library, and the ISU Foundation were hosting at the Special Collections Department on the fourth floor of the library. The Foundation was toward the end of a major multi-year fundraising drive called "Campaign Iowa State: With Pride and Purpose." It would wrap up in 2011 with more than \$867 million received in gifts and commitments. I had enough disenchantment with the Foundation that I never gave to that campaign, but I had given my collection of documentary materials to the Special Collections Department, had included the department as an heir in my will in order to support rural archives, and counted Olivia as a friend.

I was comfortable being in the familiar setting of the Special Collections Department, especially with Olivia as the host. Yet, I also felt uncomfortable as if I was some kind of country bumpkin. I have little in terms of dress-up clothing and was probably wearing clothes not much different than everyday gardening clothes, except with newer, better shirt, sweater, and slacks.

Olivia introduced President Geoffrey. He told about how the Foundation was exceeding its original "Campaign Iowa State" goal. He then explained how the Foundation had raised enough funds to endow a couple of deanships and that the next goal was to have enough money to endow all deanships.

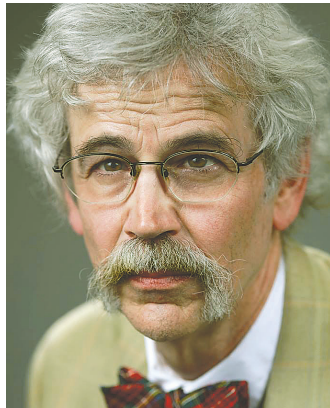
I raised my hand and asked Geoffrey if a donor endowing a dean's position would have any privileged influence on the dean. I referenced the Leopold Center, acknowledging that it was like an apple-orange comparison to a university college, but used the story of the search for a new Leopold director as an analogy. I reminded the president of how the search committee had favored one candidate but that pressure from the Farm Bureau and other influential people in Iowa had caused the president to block the candidate from becoming the new director.

Sitting next to me was a woman who was influential in ISU Foundation circles. I thought she would have known better, but she asked, "What's the Leopold Center?"



LEOPOLD CENTER
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Geoffrey is a mild-mannered, civil person, whom I generally liked. He did not miss a beat, but replied calmly, explaining what the center was, then saying that “production agriculture” is important to the state’s economy and that it would have been unwise to hire someone who would raise a flag. He was smooth, and although I have been known to be an obstreperous person—something my high school classmates and other folks would remember about me—I did not want to create a larger scene than I already had by asking the question. Indeed, I was nervous enough that I probably could not have thought straight and had the right words to say if there had been a longer discussion. However, I was glad I had raised the issue so that he would know that someone important enough to be invited to the luncheon (me) knew about what he had done and cared for the well-being of the Leopold Center. I also was glad that he so clearly showed his true colors—that he had succumbed to the influence of Big Ag.



Art Cullen.

In 2017, the Iowa legislature with the signature of Governor Branstad axed state funding for the Leopold Center. Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Art Cullen, editor of *The Storm Lake Times*, located 46 miles west of Rolfe, wrote on February 6, 2019, about the founding director of the Leopold Center, Dennis Keeney, who had claimed and presented emails that Iowa State University did not lobby the legislature to preserve the center. Cullen reported,

Wendy Wintersteen, then dean of the College of Agriculture, said that she had done everything she could to protect the center. Shortly after the center was defunded, Wintersteen was named president of the university. Steve Leath was president when the center’s demise was conceived and was gone by the time the ax fell, leaving Wintersteen as the chief official speaking on behalf of the ag college.

“We pulled out every stop we had in the college,” Wintersteen told *The Des Moines Register* at that time. “We were very visible” at the state capitol.

That’s not what the emails from legislators say. Wintersteen did author a memo alerting Iowa State alumni about the proposed elimination of funding. The Iowa Farmers Union, by contrast, issued several alerts to members to urge legislators to protect the center funding. Democrats said they were taken by surprise.

Theological and Other Perspectives on the Movement of People off the Land

Bob Coote and Marv Chaney, who taught the Old Testament courses I took in seminary, used a big term called “latifundialization” about the movement of people off the land. I Googled the word and found a definition: the “process whereby land increasingly accrues into the hands of just a few.” I recall that the “fundi” part of the word referred to the earth, and the “lati” referred to something like “lateral” and “moving off.” A big focus was on the story of Naboth’s vineyard, 1 Kings 21:

King Ahab wanted the vineyard for a garden. Naboth replied, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.” Ahab sulked, and Queen Jezebel sent dogs to kill Naboth, took the land, and gave it to Ahab for a birthday present.

Bob and Marv had our class work a lot with that story, pointing out how it contains a literary device—irony—to drive home a point. In actuality, Naboth would have been a peasant and, as such, would never have had a vineyard. Instead, he would have had a subsistence plot—a garden. Ahab would not have been interested in having a garden and would have torn up the garden and put in an olive orchard or grape vineyard with the idea of exporting the olives and wine to trade for items—for instance, iron.

A person could wonder if much has changed over the centuries since then, considering the influence that powerful interests such as governments and corporations have on how land is farmed and how they promote industrial farming.

How much of church teaching deals with land use issues? How much of human history is about people being displaced from the land? There are many great textbooks, novels, and movies with inspirational theme music about people in various cultures being displaced from the land by powerful forces. Look at the purchase of the Louisiana Territory and how our government displaced the people who were already here with a huge advertising campaign to get other people to emigrate from places such as Europe, settle, and tap the rich resources of the territory.

I have thought of the concept of “what comes around goes around.” Some people with farm backgrounds probably have never thought of their family lineages or Midwestern agriculture being as vulnerable as some of the obviously marginalized people of the world. I recall my parents’ attitudes that if the government was doing something, it must be right. However, it would be hard in this era not to notice the military/governmental/corporate/industrial/university complex (or complexes) with the seeds of that dominance sown centuries ago.

I am reminded of a phrase from Osha Gray Davidson’s book *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America’s Rural Ghetto*. He refers to the “Latinization of the Midwest.” I am also reminded of a keynote speaker years ago at a PFI conference, who suggested there are people in the federal government who think Midwestern farming methods are too costly and who would like to outsource crop production to Third World countries where labor is much cheaper. (Do those bureaucrats even give a thought to the food security issues related to such a vision?).

Kamyar Enshayan teaches at University of Northern Iowa and is director of the Center for Energy and Environmental Education at UNI. I know Kamyar through Practical Farmers of Iowa and



Photo from Kamyar Enshayan collection.

Kamyar Enshayan.

admire his integrity, prophetic candor, and commitment to environmental health. In the January 11, 2014, edition of *The Des Moines Register*, he published an opinion piece in which he compared the enterprise of modern agriculture to the enterprise of crystallized methamphetamine portrayed in the popular TV crime show “Breaking Bad” that aired from 2008 to 2013. Kamyar wrote:

During a conversation over coffee, I asked several friends what enterprise in Iowa would parallel the tragedy portrayed in “Breaking Bad”? To my surprise, without missing a beat, several people independently nominated commodity agriculture and the vast network of global corporations behind it.

Industrial commodity agriculture is entirely based on acres. It does not need stable communities. All that is needed are land, machinery, energy and chemical inputs to produce one or two products for distant markets. Civic organizations, schools, churches, libraries, rural businesses are all unnecessary to “feed the world” or to fuel ethanol plants. Long-term anthropological studies in many rural communities in the U.S. have confirmed these realities. As we have seen all over Iowa, in once-thriving towns, a gas station and, if you are lucky, a bar are all that’s left.

Think of coffee or banana plantations. The markets are not local, the benefits go elsewhere, farmers receive very little, which means rural poverty. It’s the same in Iowa.

Sociologists and economists report that markets in nearly every agricultural sector (corn, beans, beef, hogs, corn processing, etc.) are all controlled by a handful of global corporations, leaving farmers as price takers while production expenses rise. Add soil erosion, water pollution and below-poverty wages for food sector workers, and the result is rural decline and desperate situations that are the habitat for the meth enterprise.

Kamyar goes on to list other ills of modern agriculture, then concludes:

We must chart a different path. Many Iowans are striving to change all this. They include farmers who are practicing good agronomy based on ecological understanding of the land, integrating crops and livestock, grass-based production, long-term crop rotations, organic practices.

Groups across Iowa are expanding local markets for local agricultural products to create new opportunities for beginning farmers and create markets that are fair. They include food service directors and restaurant owners who support these farms. They include ordinary Iowans who value the way these farmers are growing their food and are making a point of supporting them and the land stewardship they practice.

They include Practical Farmers of Iowa, a network of farmers and others who are proving that a sane, productive, profitable, system of food and agriculture is possible and practical.

We need state and federal policies that support these forms of being in Iowa rather than breaking bad.

On April 8, 2019, *The Des Moines Register* carried an opinion piece by J.D. Scholten, the Democratic candidate for Congress who had run against the controversial and unabashedly conservative incumbent Steve King in Iowa's fourth district in 2018. In his piece, Scholten responded to a recent assertion by President Donald Trump that the United States is full and does not need more immigrants.

In contrast, Scholten claimed the nation is not full and that in the fourth district, which includes my hometown of Rolfe and Ames where I currently live, only three of the 39 counties are growing. He adds a scary observation about Pocahontas County: "It has been declining in population so fast that at this rate, the county will be depopulated by 2050."

Scholten's suggestion that the county could be depopulated by 2050 sounds like an extreme generalization even though I have often noted that census statistics show Pocahontas County is losing population as fast, or faster, than any other county in the nation. Wouldn't there still be people in the county to plant and harvest the crops or to tend to hogs at a factory farm? But who would want to hire on for those jobs if they had to live in an area with little or no sense of community and culture? And what would agriculture in the county look like if it, indeed, were still viable? Would the land, which has been prized for its deep, black, fertile soil, be 100 percent dominated by a style of agriculture that is dangerous to human health, has hazardous effects on soil health, and otherwise ruins the environment? Will depopulation mean not only that there are no more people who reside in the county, but that critters and wildlife can no longer live there? It is hard to imagine that such scenarios would actually happen within only 31 years, and yet it is easy for me to recognize that the trajectory is a real one and that what Scholten says should be taken seriously.

Decades ago, probably while in seminary, I learned that Christianity in the Western world has been filtered through and distorted by the dualism of Greek philosophy in contrast to the Christianity that evolved through the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the Greek dualistic system of thought, there are pairs of seemingly opposite concepts (dualisms). Examples would include: God/man, male/female, human/animal, light/dark, rational/irrational, civilized/uncivilized, and white/black.

The first concept in a dualism is viewed as positive or superior, while the second concept is viewed as negative or inferior. This line of thinking evolves into a hierarchy with God (as in Father God) being highest on the ladder followed by men, then women, children, animals, and nature. It also perpetuates the dominance of men over women and white people over people of color and the belief that humans are entitled to control and abuse nature.

The late Aldo Leopold, a renowned Midwestern conservationist, wrote his groundbreaking book *A Sand County Almanac* and its chapter "The Land Ethic" in 1949, four years after I was born. Leopold says in the introduction, "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

In 1996, farmer and author of many books on agriculture, Wendell Berry, wrote *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. It influenced my thinking in the decade when I was beginning this project and deciding to manage my own land. Berry's book exposed me to the notion that there have been and continue to be both exploiters and nurturers in how land is viewed. Berry writes in his opening chapter:



J.D. Scholten, congressional nominee. 2019.

Photo from J.D. Scholten campaign committee.

The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce dependably for an indefinite time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, “hard facts”; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind.

Vandana Shiva is a philosopher, environmental activist, and founder and director of the Navdanya Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology. Shiva spoke at ISU in 2015 about the dominance and perils of industrial agriculture and claimed, “The Midwest is not feeding anyone.” She added that 90 percent of the corn and soybean crop is used for animal feed and biofuels and that “diverting grain from humans to cars and factory farms is not a food system.” Shiva explained further in her 2016 book, *Who Really Feeds the World: The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology*:

If “food” is the web of life—the currency of life, our nourishment, our cells, our blood, our mind, our culture, and our identity—and the “world” is Gaia—our rich and living planet, our Mother Earth, vibrant with diverse beings and ecosystems, multitudes of peoples and cultures—then it is the contributions of biodiversity, compassion, and the knowledge and intelligence of small-scale farmers that feed the world. My own research and lived experience over the last three decades has taught me that the answer to the food question does not lie in industrial agriculture but in agroecology and ecological farming.

When I asked on the PFI listserv about Shiva's lecture, one friend who is a soils instructor at Iowa State and teaches a course on world hunger responded, “Also, while she [Shiva] has some great thoughts, please do note her lack of support for her arguments with data/research/specifics. She doesn't meet the standard for my world food issues course on many items.”

On one hand, my friend's response reminded me of the ways in which scientists at land-grant universities, leaders of extension programs, and others tried to discount Rachel Carson, environmentalist author, after she published her book *Silent Spring* in 1962. On the other hand, I need to respect my friend's perspective and find out more, considering how easy it is to buy completely into the words of a renowned expert in any field.

Also, I have dear friends in Ames who are like my soul mates in terms of urban farming. With their careers immersed in working with plant genetics, my friends can react defensively to generalized criticisms of GMOs. They believe there is potential for good with the use of GMOs and that GMOs are not intrinsically bad. Of course, it is easy to understand that the



Idyllic corn field in Section 12, Roosevelt Township, just north across the road from the farm where Helen grew up. Owned by Reigelsberger-Wolford Farms LLC and operated by Mick Reigelsberger. 2015.

companies who promote GMOs and their required herbicides would say that in the end their products are necessary to feed the world.

Another lesson I learned in seminary was from Christian education professor Harold Hunt, who said, “Dialogue does not happen when one party holds a gun.” What he meant was that for true dialogue to happen, there needs to be a way to ensure equal influence for the people engaged in the conversation. I believe it is fair to say that those corporate, government, and other parties who promote industrialized production agriculture are the ones armed with guns in decisions about modern day agriculture. Those who insist the system is hazardous and instead promote ecoagriculture, regenerative agriculture, and organic farming do not hold guns in the conversations.

As it is, I am grateful for the opportunities ISU does provide in bringing speakers such as Vandana Shiva to campus. In ways, she delivered her message in the belly of the beast, although there is probably no way to end patriarchy and the dualistic thinking that man is superior both to women and nature. Indeed, U.S. culture seems like an occupied territory that is becoming even more dominated by those who want to exploit people and the land. People throughout history have learned how to survive, and in some cases thrive, in occupied systems territory. The challenge today is for people to be wise, committed, collaborative, resilient, and resourceful to find ways to work around or within the system.